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## Covid-19 Neologisms and their Social Use: An Analysis from the Perspective of Linguistic Relativism

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore neologisms related to Covid-19 through the lens of the language-mind relationship, in terms of linguistic relativity. From a list of 25 Covid-19 neologisms collected from online dictionaries and Twitter.com, eight scientific and pop culture neologisms were selected to assess the motive of creation by exploring their first recorded use. Subsequently, the usage of Covid-19 neologisms in social media discourse was contextually analysed using the SFL framework of field, tenor, and mode to investigate whether it was illustrative of language influence over perception, or vice versa. A cyclic relationship was observed, in which perception prompted the creation of neologisms, whereas language influence on perception was evident in their usage in discourse.

**Keywords:** language influence, perception, language-mind relationship, word coinage

### Introduction

Does language influence perception or does perception influence language? Linguistic relativity, also known as the Sapir Whorf hypothesis, is a theory which propounds that language affects the speaker's world view. This has been rejected by another camp of linguists who showed that thought was not only independent of language (Scaller, 1991; Griffin & Speck, 2004; Osvath & Osvath, 2008) but influenced it. They argued that perceptions, interests, and needs were determiners of language use, and word coinage falls under the same domain (Steinberg & Sciarini, 2013).

Neologisms are newly coined terms, words, or phrases in mainstream language to fulfill a need in speech often created by a new experience (Behera & Mishra, 2013). This is most obvious in the flood of neologisms that accompanied social networking and technology advances in the last two decades (Roig Marin, 2016; Lehrar, 2003; Liu & Liu, 2014). Neologisms, thus, codify a new social/cultural experience in society and are not just meaningful language signs – they are “more the products of a conceptual system” (Nikadambaeva et al., 2019: 72 - 73). The recent Covid-19 outbreak was also followed by a wave of neologisms that contributed to the

ever-evolving social discourse at different levels as Rafi (2020) states that the spread of Covid-19 gave rise to certain themes in discourse such as medical facilitation, financial crisis, termination of academic sessions in educational institutes. Baig (2019) argued that besides achieving the obvious purpose of communication, linguistic expressions are also employed to determine people's outlook. Likewise, the expressions related to the pandemic also showed how people's personal and social perceptions were evolving, and how new words were being used to elicit and express certain perspectives. The use of language to influence global communication has been emphasised in many studies (Lowe, 2018; Smith, Johnston-Robledo, McHugh & Chrysler, 2010; Clark, 1977), which show how a particular mind-set or perception is propagated through language use. Hence, the understanding of how language and mind interrelate in the backdrop of social needs and social discourse is essential to gauge how the words we utter both influence and are influenced by people's perspectives and can exacerbate or minimise social conflict by endorsing or denouncing preconceived narratives (Hamilton 1988; Crawford, 2001).

### **Research Questions**

This study investigates Covid-19 related neologisms to explore how language and the mind interact to make sense of a changed environment creating changed needs. The study aims to address this by answering the following research questions:

- What social needs motivated the creation of neologisms related to Covid-19?
- How are these neologisms affecting the perceptions of their users on social media?

### **Methodology**

This study of Covid-19 neologisms offers two points of debate. On one hand, it looks into the creation of new words influenced by the virus – what social need prompted their creation and where does this process fall in the language-thought paradigm. On the other hand, it explores how the usage of these words is affecting the discourse around the virus.

For the first point, around 25 new words / neologisms related to Covid-19 were collected from the Merriam Webster Dictionary, the Oxford Dictionary, Dictionary.com and Twitter.com (See Appendix). Merriam Webster added 10 new words / phrases in an unscheduled update on March, 18, 2020 while The Oxford Dictionary updated 12 Covid-19 related words / phrases in April 2020. Dictionary.com included Covid-19 related terms that became popular on social media including *covidiot*, *quarantine and chill*, *coronacation* and *coronial*. A search for Covid-19 hashtags on Twitter.com yielded numerous posts including both scientific and pop culture neologisms. Out of these 25 neologisms, eight were selected for analysis. These terms have been placed within a taxonomy of scientific and pop culture neologisms and the motive behind their creation has been analysed based on their recorded 'first-use'.

For the second point, to observe the usage and effect of these neologisms, samples of their use in *tweets* have been collected from Twitter.com. One tweet was selected for each word, after going through at least 30 tweets containing that word by searching through hashtags on Twitter. The tweets have been analysed according to Systemic Functional Linguistics' (SFL)

context analysis model of field-tenor-mode for identifying patterns of tone, message and purpose. Zappawigna (2012) has suggested this theoretical model for analysis of Twitter posts, as every text has a context and field-tenor-mode analysis of the text provides an understanding of the context by looking at meaningful linguistic choices (Anjum & Javed, 2019). Field specifies what is happening, tenor covers the interpersonal dynamics at play and mode deals with the textual bearing. Rhetorical mode is significant in this model as it indicates how the text contributes to the situation it functions in, whether it is didactic, informative, persuasive, etc. (Halliday & Mathiessen, 2014). This analysis model can be conflated with the language-mind relationship because at its base is the understanding that every text has been written by somebody for somebody, and by ascertaining the content, the audience and the functional role of the text, an understanding can be reached regarding purpose, intent and influence.

## Analysis and Discussion

### *Social Needs and Covid-19 Neologisms*

The findings of the first question brought to light that Covid-19 related neologisms fall under two major categories: scientific and pop-culture neologisms. Table 1 explicates the first recorded use of four words that describe scientific and medical concepts associated with Covid-19. By observing the first use of these words, an understanding of the motive behind their creation can be reached.

**Table 1.** Initial Usage of Scientific Words

<i>Word</i>	<i>First Use Specific to Covid-19</i>	<i>Source</i>		
<i>Covid - 19</i>	Following WHO best practices for naming of new human infectious diseases, WHO has named the disease COVID-19, short for ‘coronavirus disease 2019’	The	Oxford	English
<i>Community spread</i>	Dr. [Anthony] Fauci...said community spread made it almost impossible to predict how many cases there will be.	The	Merriam	Webster
<i>Infodemic</i>	The director-general of WHO has called on governments, companies, and news outlets around the globe to tackle an ‘infodemic’ of fake news, which he characterized as being as dangerous as the coronavirus itself.	The	Oxford	English
<i>Social distancing</i>	Residents should redouble their efforts to follow federal guidelines regarding social distancing and limiting contact with others.	The	Oxford	English

The recorded first use of these words shows the intention to give a scientific and technical term to aspects related to a new social reality. The pandemic was named *Covid-19* by WHO on February 11, 2020, a much needed scientific and objective term given the racist and

provocative implications of alternative referents such as ‘the Chinese Virus’ and ‘the Wuhan Virus’. The other scientific/technical terms capture facets of the new experience that needed concise names rather than long-winded explanations that made discourse clumsy and cumbersome.

Table 2 informs about four concepts related to Covid-19 that became popular on social media networking sites and gained momentum as they described the situational facets of the virus. The first use of these neologisms was traced to understand why they came into being.

**Table 2.** Initial Usage of Pop-culture Words

Word	First Use Specific to Covid-19	Source
<i>Covidiot</i>	Did you see that covidiot with 300 rolls of toilet paper in his trolley?	March 16, 2020 on urbandictionary.com
<i>Zoom bombing</i>	#Zoombombing is the newest #cyberattack, and it’s simply shameful—but not unexpected, since first-time installs of the #Zoom app rose by 1,126%.	Started trending on March 18, 2020 on Twitter.com
<i>Quarantine and chill</i>	Heyy ( <i>sic</i> ), things are getting pretty crazy at the moment, wanna ( <i>sic</i> ) quarantine and chill?	March 13, 2020 on urbandictionary.com
<i>Coronacation</i>	Because of the coronavirus, I can buy an airline ticket to Burkina Faso for \$13 as a spring break coronacation	March 14, 2020 on urbandictionary.com

*Zoom-bombing* has an interesting history in its very short existence. It started out as a humorous take on photo-bombing, where a person or object ruins a photo by making an unexpected or comical appearance. However, it quickly took a dark turn as a form of cyber-attack in which a zoom meeting would be hijacked with obscene, racist and upsetting videos/images. The other terms reflect a type of gallows-humour. The uncertainty of life post-Covid19 has touched every human being; however, life must go on and it is this bravado in the face of a dark situation that has fuelled the creation of these catchy neologisms. *Quarantine and chill* is a take on Netflix and chill, *coronacation* is a blend of corona and vacation, referring to the forced ‘vacation’ brought on by the virus and *Covidiot*, a blend of Covid and idiot, is a person who flaunts the prescribed measures to control the virus. The creation of these neologisms reflects the way language evolves to fit a new social reality. Steinberg & Sciarini (2013) proffered that interest and need determined the coinage of new words, and these needs arose from our perception of the world rather than due to any influence of language. This understanding – the creation of Covid-19 related neologisms is a case of perception influencing language – answers the first research question.

### *Covid-19 Neologisms and their Social Use*

Moving to the second question, how are these neologisms affecting the discourse around Covid-19? A context analysis of selected tweets related to the virus from Twitter.com, which used these

neologisms either in text or as hashtags, is presented to uncover the ways in which the usage of these words is affecting the perceptions of users on social media. The tweets have been divided into two groups; the first group contains scientific/technical neologisms while the second contains pop culture neologisms.

### *Scientific / Technical Neologisms in Tweets*

#### *Covid-19*



**Figure 1.** #Covid-19 Tweet

**Table 3.** Contextual Analysis of #Covid-19 Tweet

Field	Tenor	Mode
A member of the public is raising awareness around a potentially dangerous social situation arising in the wake of the Eid ul Fitr festival. Lockdown has been eased in Pakistan and people have started leaving their houses to shop.	A member of the public addresses his fellow citizens. The sociometric role shows negatively charged affect. The value is negatively loaded. The writer is worried and using a persuasive tone, posing rhetorical questions to empower his argument.	The rhetorical mode is exhortatory. Turn is monologic, medium is written and channel is graphic (as with all twitter posts).

The context analysis shows the concern and apprehension of a citizen who fears a rise in the Covid-19 curve due to people rushing to shopping markets. The hashtag *Covid-19Pakistan* is being used to alert people to the dangerous situation. As a contrast to Covid-19, a tweet containing the hashtag *ChineseVirus* is also given:



**Figure 2.** #ChineseVirus Tweet

**Table 4.** Contextual Analysis of #Chinese Virus Tweet

Field	Tenor	Mode
A member of the public calls for a boycott of Chinese goods, making accusations that these goods are used to collect data for China to create bio weapons like Covid-19 and contribute towards funding war against India.	A member of the public is inciting his fellow citizens to action with accusations against China. The sociometric role shows negatively charged affect. The value is negatively loaded. The term ‘Chinese virus’ is used to back anti-China arguments.	The rhetorical mode is exhortatory.

This post is selected for being reasonably worded and less aggressive than other posts containing the hashtag *Chinesevirus*. Even so, the anti-China sentiment is obvious, reinforced by use of the term *Chinesevirus* even though the virus had been officially named months before this tweet was posted (May 23, 2020).

### Infodemic

**Figure 3.** #infodemic Tweet**Table 5.** Contextual Analysis of #infodemic Tweet

Field	Tenor	Mode
A private business is creating awareness about the infodemic – the avalanche of unconfirmed or false information about the virus.	A business addresses the public. The value is positively loaded. Though the addresser invokes concern, there is a call for action with positive involvement. The tone is persuasive and hopeful.	The rhetorical mode is persuasive and informative.

The post is a public message warning against the spread of false information, like almost all other posts with the hashtag *infodemic*. The similar word-formation of *infodemic* and *pandemic* has the effect of inducing a sense of gravity and responsibility.



## Social Distancing



**Figure 4.** Social Distancing Tweet

**Table 6.** Contextual Analysis of Social Distancing Tweet

Field	Tenor	Mode
An elected public figure, the UK Prime Minister enjoins social distancing.	The PM is addressing the public. The value of the message is positively loaded. The text is informative, brief and ends with a straightforward instruction. The tone is brisk and professional.	The rhetorical mode is informative and exhortatory.

This brief post relays information simply and matter-of-factly, in a manner that prompts a response. This is the safest way to ensure the message is undiluted and understood. *Social distancing* has the effect of raising awareness and urging caution in most of the posts it is attached to.

## Pop Culture Neologisms in Text

### Covidhumour



**Figure 5.** #Covidhumour

**Table 7.** Contextual Analysis of #Covidhumour Tweet

Field	Tenor	Mode
A member of the public shares a 'meme' or internet joke about the messages being sent by businesses expressing solidarity in the wake of Covid-19. The	A person shares a humorous meme. The value of the message is positively loaded, and depends on the familiarity of the experience.	The rhetorical mode is narrative.



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punch line is a humorous jab on strict airline rules regarding luggage limits, usually 50lbs. The text incites humour with a frank and mildly sarcastic tone.

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The meme consists of a casual, conversational-style swipe on the vapid solidarity being expressed by businesses in an apparent marketing ploy. The point is not to deride the businesses; it is more of a humorous, light-hearted take on a familiar situation experienced by many.

### *Covidiot*



**Figure 6.** #Covidiot Tweet

**Table 8.** Contextual Analysis of #Covidiot Tweet

Field	Tenor	Mode
A member of the public describes the types of <i>Covidiot</i> s, calling out people who are breaking prescribed rules in ignorance, careless privilege and for love of family.	A person shares their frustration in a cleverly worded description. The tone is witty, deprecating and sarcastic.	The rhetorical mode is descriptive.

The text is an expression of dark humour at the expense of people who are disregarding the precautions necessary to limit the spread of Covid-19 out of ignorance or privilege. By doing so, they not only put their own lives in danger but also the rest of the community especially their loved ones. The post is deprecating whilst retaining an element of humour and wit.

### *Coronacation*



**Figure 7.** Coronacation Tweet

**Table 9.** Contextual Analysis of Coronacation Tweet

Field	Tenor	Mode
A member of the public cracks a joke on the online teaching experience; he attaches an image of a person fleeing, with a caption implying that his performance has improved during online tests due to unfair means.	A person shares an instance of situational humour. The value is positive and the tone is frank and light-hearted. The image is imperative to the joke and provides a slapstick element, reinforced by the use of the flippant term <i>coronacation</i> .	The rhetorical mode is narrative.

This post is an example of the numerous posts flooding social media, in which a new situation brought about by the Virus is the target of humour based on the familiarity of the situation for the audience. In this case, the joke centres on online classes and the term *coronacation* lends an element of irreverent humour in the face of a bleak situation.

The context analysis of Covid-19 neologisms being used on Twitter.com shows a difference in influence of scientific/technical neologisms and pop culture neologisms. Scientific neologisms generally have the common effect of creating a sense of caution and responsibility. The use of *Covid-19* in tweets has no connotations of race or roots, in contrast to the tweets attached to *#Chinesevirus* and *#Wuhanvirus*. The use of particular words has triggering effects on how we view the world as emphasized by Hussein (2012); in an on-going electrophysiological research on language influence, Lai has cited examples of how Asian Americans have experienced increased hate crimes in the US after President Trump alluded to the virus as the “Chinese Virus” (Makansi, 2020). The words we choose to use matter as they influence our perception, and this becomes increasingly obvious as language is used to promote a particular narrative in cases of racism, sexism and other forms of oppression (Bloom & Keil, 2001).

Combining certain charged words with others creates a subconscious sense of connection that is hard to shake off. At its worst, the virus became a Chinese weapon or conspiracy and at its best, it was a Chinese mistake, an example of Chinese incompetence. Either way, the Chinese were at fault and people began to direct their anger towards people of Asian origin. Charissa Cheah, a psychology professor at the University of Maryland, who is conducting research into discrimination against Chinese Americans during the pandemic, said: “You cannot easily dismantle the ideas that these terms convey. When the terms that you use directly connect a particular racial or ethnic group and a disease, you reinforce the link between these two entities” (Timberg & Chiu, 2020).

Other terms such as *social distancing* and *infodemic* have managed to create an effect of caution and restraint through their objective terminology. Linking *infodemic* (blend of information and pandemic) with pandemic has cleverly imbued *infodemic* with significant gravitas – the implication being ‘do not spread unconfirmed information just as you would not willingly spread disease’. These words serve to create a responsible and mindful social discourse

around Covid-19; this kind of language influence on the information conveyed has also been asserted by Zlatev & Blomberg (2015).

On the other hand, there is a distinct pattern visible in the pop culture neologisms - a pattern of wit, humour and light-heartedness. The hashtag *covidhumour* is being used to talk about funny incidents or ideas/thoughts connected to Covid-19 situations. *Coronacation* and *quarantine and chill* give an upbeat spin to social distancing. *Covidiot* is a person who is in fact endangering lives with his/her ignorance or carelessness; however, the term *covidiot* carries undertones of deprecatory light-heartedness, more dismissive than condemnatory. Perhaps, this is what is needed in an increasingly volatile environment where violence in shops over limited stocks of everyday items has brought to light the desperation of the human condition under a veneer of civilization. Calling out such people dismissively and indifferently, rather than blaming them for the relentless spread of this deadly virus, creates a more tolerant attitude.

Vygotsky (1962) and Tomasello (2009) have argued that the perspectives provided by linguistic expressions and certain forms of discourse contribute to understanding of beliefs, intentions and emotions. Hence, the analysis of the scientific and pop culture neologisms related to Covid-19 informs us how language can influence the mind to create perceptions of caution, responsibility, racism and alarm, and can also paint a brighter picture through humour and wit. The challenging environment created by the virus – working from home, online classes, widespread hoarding, empty stores, online medical appointments, not seeing friends and family, etc. – is both unnatural and unnerving, but by lightening the situation through funny anecdotes and witty commentary, the experience is trivialized and made more manageable.

## Conclusion

An interesting pattern emerged in the discussion around the two research questions. In the first place, neologisms were coined to fill a social void created by perception, exhibiting the influence of perception over language. In turn, these neologisms influenced the perception of their users on social media by conveying certain perspectives and pushing certain narratives – as evident in *#Chinesevirus*. This clearly points to the influence of language over thought and perception. Thus, a cyclic paradigm can explain the language-mind relationship. Language relativity explains only half of the cycle; the other half is reflective of perception influencing or determining language.

The study has limited itself to social media posts from Twitter.com. To assess if these patterns of usage are prevalent on other platforms of social media, further research may be conducted in the form of a comparative analysis of the use of Covid-19 neologisms on social networking and blogging sites such as Facebook and Reddit.

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## Appendix

### List of Covid-19 Related Words from Dictionaries and Twitter.com

Sr. No	Word	Source
1.	COVID-19, n.	Merriam Webster Dictionary, Oxford English Dictionary, Dictionary.com
2.	nCoV, n	Merriam Webster Dictionary
3.	Index case, n	Merriam Webster Dictionary
4.	Index patient, n	Merriam Webster Dictionary
5.	Patient zero, n	Merriam Webster Dictionary
6.	Contact tracing, n	Merriam Webster Dictionary
7.	Community spread, n	Merriam Webster Dictionary
8.	Super-spreader, n	Merriam Webster Dictionary
9.	Social distancing, n	Merriam Webster Dictionary, Oxford English Dictionary
10.	Self-quarantine, v	Merriam Webster Dictionary, Oxford English Dictionary
11.	Infodemic, n	Oxford English Dictionary
12.	Self-isolate v	Oxford English Dictionary
13.	Self-isolation, n	Oxford English Dictionary
14.	Shelter in place, n	Oxford English Dictionary
15.	Hunker down, v	Dictionary.com
16.	Novel coronavirus, n	Dictionary.com
17.	Rona, n	Dictionary.com
18.	Covidiot, n	Dictionary.com
19.	Zoom-bombing, v	Dictionary.com
20.	Quarantine and chill, v	Dictionary.com
21.	Coronacation, n	Dictionary.com
22.	Doom-scrolling, v	Dictionary.com
23.	Coronials, n	Dictionary.com
24.	Corona, v	Twitter.com
25.	Covidhumour, n	Twitter.com

These words are available at the following websites of these dictionaries:

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/new-dictionary-words-coronavirus-covid-19>

[https://public.oed.com/updates/new-words-list-april-2020/#new\\_words](https://public.oed.com/updates/new-words-list-april-2020/#new_words)

<https://www.dictionary.com/e/s/new-words-we-created-because-of-coronavirus/#1>

Twitter terms can be found as hashtags at Twitter.com